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SIPDIS

WHA/CAN FOR TERRY BREESE

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SUBJECT: HARPER FACES STEEP UPHILL BATTLE IN QUEBEC

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

1. (SBU) Summary: In the fall of 2003, the federal Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservative parties merged and Stephen Harper beat out Stockwell Day for the new Conservative Party leadership. In the federal election following that merger the Conservatives failed to elect anyone in Quebec province. Today, Harper is desperate to pick up seats in Quebec but his chances are slim at the moment. Political pundits tell us that Harper would need to win at least 10 seats in Quebec to win nationally. Hence, it is no coincidence that the party's first national convention is being held in Montreal, March 17-19. As the Quebec Tories convene in Montreal, Harper is still struggling to gain support in French-speaking Canada, where Conservative Party values are not widely shared. End summary.

2. In 1984, no one would have predicted the Brian Mulroney wave that swept Quebec in which the Tories won 55 of a total 75 seats. Harper is asking Quebecers to remember the "beau risque" proposed by PQ premier Rene Levesque at that time, which helped Brian Mulroney's Conservatives defeat the federal Liberals. (Levesque urged Quebecers to vote for the Conservatives in the hopes of negotiating a new constitutional deal.) So far, however, Stephen Harper and his party have so far been unable to establish any strong footing in Quebec province.

3. (SBU) CG and Pol/Econ Asst recently had lunch with Harper's lieutenant for Quebec, Josee Verner. Verner ran and lost in the Quebec City riding of Louis St-Laurent in June 2004 but managed to collect the highest level of support in the province with 31% of the votes in her riding, behind the Bloc candidate Bernard Cleary. (The average support for conservative candidates in the other provincial ridings was only 8%.) Although Verner did not win her constituency, Harper took the unusual step of naming her to his shadow cabinet as his Quebec lieutenant and chair of the Quebec caucus. (Bio note: Josee Verner is a native of Quebec City, is married, and has three children. Verner worked for Quebec Liberal Premier Robert Bourassa from 1986-1992 and campaigned for the right-of-center Action Democratique de Quebec (ADQ) party in the last provincial campaign. End note.)

4. (SBU) Josee Verner told us her party has everything to win and nothing to lose in Quebec. They are vigorously building support here and Quebec is the party's number one priority. She is the face and look of the party in the province and her job, she said, is to plant roots. The party has been increasingly present over the past months and Harper has come to Quebec on numerous occasions since the June election. Verner confidently predicted that the Tories would form the next government.

5. (SBU) The politics, she pointed out, are simple. Outraged by the corruption of the federal Liberals, Quebecers decided to vote for the Bloc Quebecois. However, by electing 54 Bloc MPs, voters helped the Liberals return to power. The Bloc Quebecois picked up the maximum number of seats last year and can only lose constituencies now. Paul Martin, she said, has proven to be a major disappointment to voters and the Gomery Commission has disclosed the corruption of the previous Chretien government. Comparatively, Tory leader Stephen Harper's strong points are honesty, integrity and transparency; he is squeaky clean, she said. The Conservatives are working very hard on the ground and they are ready organizationally and financially for an election, she assured us.

6. (SBU) Others we spoke with agree that the Conservatives need to win in Quebec, but are skeptical that this can be done with Harper at the helm. Michel Rivard, another Conservative party organizer here, told us the Conservatives would need to win ten seats in Quebec to win nationally. But Rivard believes Harper's focus on moral conservatism, especially gay marriage, is losing him support in Quebec. He, like other conservatives in Quebec, believe that there will need to be a Conservative party leadership change before Quebecers vote conservative in significant numbers.

7. (SBU) Separately, the Ambassador and CG met with ADQ leader Mario Dumont. (Dumont's party is the provincial equivalent of Harper's Conservative Party and many of Harper's organizers in Quebec, including Verner, are also local ADQ party organizers.) Dumont also felt that the chances of the Conservatives under Harper in Quebec are slim. Dumont believes that had Bernard Lord assumed the leadership of the Conservative Party, the entire political picture would be different for the Conservatives in Quebec. With Harper, the challenge of the

Conservatives in Quebec is simply to exist. Harper represents moral conservatism which is unpopular in Quebec. Dumont's bottom line: Harper is not the right candidate to win votes in Quebec.

18. (SBU) Comment: Despite Verner's optimism, recent polls show no clear trend in Quebec voting intentions favoring Harper and his party. Harper's high-profile stance opposing gay marriage left many Quebec Tory organizers scrambling to explain their party's moral conservatism. Verner tried to limit the damage by highlighting Harper's decision to allow Conservative MPs (and supporters) to vote their conscience on the matter. But we believe she has not succeeded in overcoming what is now seen in Quebec as the Conservative Party's defining characteristic: moral conservatism. Finally, Harper's efforts to overhaul his Quebec organization by bringing in new faces, including Verner, has triggered infighting which is likely to surface at the Party congress this weekend.